District Voter Turnout and Dyadic Representation in Congress*

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Abstract

One of the most important tools by which citizens can influence their elected officials’ behavior is through voting – the electoral connection. Previous studies demonstrate that the opinions of voters are better represented than the opinions of non-voters within an electoral jurisdiction, but we do not know whether jurisdictions with higher levels of aggregate voter turnout are better represented by their elected officials compared to those with lower levels of turnout. Using data compiled across five congressional sessions (2003-2013), this paper investigates whether congressional districts with higher voter turnout are better represented by their Member of Congress (MC). We find evidence that district voter turnout positively conditions the relationship between district opinion and MC voting behavior even after accounting for the possible effects of electoral competition and district income and racial demographics. In addition, we uncover evidence that there are partisan differences in this conditioning effect such that higher voter turnout enhances roll call voting responsiveness among Democratic MCs but not among Republican MCs. These findings suggest that congressional districts as a whole benefit from a political responsiveness standpoint when more of their constituents turn out to vote and contribute to literatures on political representation, political participation, democratic accountability, and the U.S. Congress.

Keywords: policy responsiveness, dyadic representation, voter turnout, public opinion, Congress
The linkage between citizens’ opinions and their elected officials’ policy decisions is a cornerstone of a representative democracy. As V.O. Key (1961, 7) famously stated, “Unless mass views have some place in the shaping of policy, all the talk about democracy is nonsense.” Accordingly, a large literature evaluates the extent to which constituents’ preferences are reflected in their Member of Congress’ (MC) roll call voting behavior (e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963; Erikson 1978; Erikson and Wright 2000; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Gerber and Lewis 2004; Clinton 2006; Griffin 2006). These studies of dyadic representation have found, to varying degrees, that constituency opinion is a notable predictor of their MCs’ in-office behavior whereby more liberal congressional districts tend to be represented by liberal MCs and more conservative districts by conservative MCs.

One of the most important tools by which citizens can influence their elected officials’ behavior is through voting – the electoral connection (Mayhew 1974; Fenno 1978). By voting, citizens are able to sanction representatives who are out of step with their preferences (Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002; Carson et al. 2010; Nyhan et al. 2012) and select representatives who are like-minded (Miller and Stokes 1963) and will support policies they desire. While previous studies have demonstrated that the opinions of voters are better represented than the opinions of non-voters (Griffin and Newman 2005), we do not know whether congressional districts with higher levels of voter turnout exhibit a stronger linkage between district opinion and MC voting behavior compared to districts with lower levels of turnout. In this short paper, we investigate whether aggregate voter turnout promotes greater legislator responsiveness to district public opinion.

Using data compiled across five congressional sessions (2003-2013), we find evidence that greater district voter turnout positively conditions the relationship between district opinion
and MC voting behavior even after accounting for the possible effects of electoral competition and district income and racial demographics. In addition, we uncover evidence that there are partisan differences in this conditioning effect such that higher voter turnout enhances roll call voting responsiveness among Democratic MCs but not among Republican MCs. These findings suggest that congressional districts as a whole benefit from a political responsiveness standpoint when more of their constituents turn out to vote and contribute to literatures on political representation, political participation, democratic accountability, and the U.S. Congress.

Background and Theoretical Expectations

Previous investigations into the linkage between constituency political opinion and legislator roll call voting behavior have generally found that constituency opinion is a consistent predictor of legislator voting (Miller and Stokes 1963; Erikson 1978; Erikson and Wright 2000; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Gerber and Lewis 2004; Clinton 2006; Griffin 2006). However, we inevitably expect that some MCs will represent the aggregate preferences of their districts better than others. This variation might be random, or it may be the case that some MCs strategically determine that they can vote according to their own policy preferences or with their party’s established position instead of their district’s preferences without being voted out of office. As Erikson and Wright (2000, 149) explain, “Since their personal preferences sometimes conflict with the strategically best ideological response, members must gauge when they must reflect the district ideologically rather than risk defeat, and when they can afford the risk of shirking district preferences by achieving personal ideological satisfaction.” One potential reason that some MCs are able to shirk more than others is that their constituents may pay relatively little attention to their MC’s behavior and may be unlikely to show up at the ballot box to
sanction the MC if she does step out of line. If an MC perceives that her constituents pay relatively little attention to politics and are unlikely to turn out to vote, she may have greater license to stray from the preferences of the district when voting on the House floor. By contrast, in a district that is politically attentive and routinely exhibits high levels of voter turnout, an MC that significantly deviates from aggregate constituency opinion does so at her own electoral peril.

The belief that voting has its “rewards” is well-supported in the empirical literature on political representation. Most notably, Griffin and Newman (2005) find that the preferences of voters in a state consistently predict the roll call voting behavior of their Senators while the preferences of non-voters in a state do not. To explain these findings, they demonstrate that voters are able to elect like-minded representatives (Miller and Stokes 1963) and are more likely to communicate their preferences to elected officials by other means as well (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). In a related study, Martin (2003) finds that counties within congressional districts with higher voter turnout are rewarded by their elected officials with more federal grant money when compared to counties with similar demographic characteristics that have lower voter turnout. These findings suggest that elected officials pay attention to who votes among their constituents and adjust their in-office behavior accordingly.

Similarly, Verba and Nie (1972) show that local elected officials’ policy priorities tend to correspond to the preferences of politically active constituents as opposed to the inactive.

The expectation that voters are better represented than non-voters does not, however, receive universal support in empirical assessments. For example, in his models of ideological proximity between citizens and their Member of Congress, Ellis (2012) finds that non-voters are actually better represented than voters after controlling for an array of demographic characteristics. Similarly, Flavin (2012) finds that low
From a theoretical standpoint, one likely reason why voters are better represented is that voters make up an “attentive public” that is more likely to monitor an elected official’s behavior in office and sanction that representative at election time if she becomes out of step with the district (Arnold 1990; Hutchings 2003). Voters are also more likely to be politically active in other ways, such as contacting elected officials, further strengthening the connection between the voter and the MC (Griffin and Newman 2006; Ansolabehere and Jones 2012). Given the great lengths MCs go to in learning about their constituents and district as a whole (Fenno 1978; Grimmer 2013), it is likely that MCs have some sense of how active and attentive (or not) their constituency is compared to other districts. In active congressional districts with relatively high levels of voter turnout, MCs will be especially concerned about being punished for voting out of step with their district and will calibrate their behavior in office (including how they vote in Congress) accordingly. Therefore, it is our expectation that the linkage between constituency opinion and legislator roll call voting behavior will be stronger in districts with higher levels of aggregate voter turnout compared to districts with lower turnout.

**Data and Empirical Strategy**

To evaluate the correspondence between district opinion and the voting behavior of Members of Congress, we use a responsiveness method (Achen 1978; Griffin and Newman 2005; Bartels 2008) that examines whether as public opinion becomes more conservative across congressional districts, MCs’ voting behavior also becomes more conservative as well. We are then further interested in whether greater district voter turnout boosts MC responsiveness to income citizens’ political opinions are not better represented by their U.S. Senator when they vote at higher rates.
district opinion. To submit this question to empirical scrutiny, we require three sources of data: (1) a measure of MCs’ roll call voting behavior in office, (2) a measure of constituency preferences in congressional districts, and (3) a measure of voter turnout in congressional districts.

MC roll call voting behavior is measured using their DW-NOMINATE coordinates (McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 1997).³ These coordinates range continuously from -1 to +1 with a higher score indicating a more conservative voting record. These scores are usually interpreted as measuring a legislator’s general social welfare ideology, given their revealed preferences. Other studies of congressional voting use various versions of NOMINATE scores as a dependent variable (Jenkins 1999; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Bartels 2008) and these scores are highly correlated with similar summary measures of legislator roll call behavior such as interest group ratings and Heckman-Snyder scores (Burden, Caldeira, and Groseclose 2000).

To measure constituency opinion at the congressional district level, we follow previous studies by using the two-party presidential vote share in each district with the rationale that districts that vote for the Republican candidate at a higher rate relative to other districts are more politically conservative than districts that vote for the Republican candidate at a lower rate (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001; Canes-Wrone, Brady, and Cogan 2002). Specifically, we calculate the two-party Republican vote share for each district and normalize the data (to a mean of zero and standard deviation of one) by election year. This procedure allows for comparing districts relative to each other in a given year. Since presidential elections are held every four years and congressional sessions are every two years, we impute the district

³ Congressional roll call voting data are available at: http://voteview.com/dwnl.htm.
presidential election data forward two years (i.e. we use the presidential vote share data in 2000 to measure district opinion for 2002, vote share from 2004 to measure opinion in 2006, etc.). This measure of district ideology is particularly useful in this study because election results are a clear and widely visible demonstration of district ideology, and will likely be a significant factor in MCs’ understanding of their constituencies’ ideology.

We collect MC voting behavior and district opinion for 2003-2013. This time period was selected because it covers five congressional sessions where congressional district boundaries were (nearly) identical in congressional districts in every state. We then model MC voting behavior as a function of district opinion in the preceding election. For example, we use district opinion for the 2004 election to predict MC roll call voting for the 2005-2007 congressional session. As previous studies lead us to expect, when we model MC roll call voting behavior the coefficient for district opinion is positive and statistically different from zero. This finding indicates that more politically conservative congressional districts are represented by more politically conservative MCs. Notably, this opinion-voting linkage remains when we add an indicator for MC Republican partisanship into the regression model. In other words, district opinion predicts MC voting behavior even after accounting for the overpowering predictive power of MC partisanship.

Our original contribution in this paper is then evaluating whether congressional districts with higher voter turnout are even better represented by their MC. In other words, is the linkage between district opinion and MC voting behavior heightened in congressional districts with higher voter turnout? To assess this question, we require data on voter turnout at the congressional district level. Unfortunately, voter turnout data disaggregated to the congressional district level is especially challenging to come by. However, we were able to construct a measure
of voter turnout by combining data sources together. Specially, we take the total number of votes in a congressional race as provided by the Federal Election Commission and divide it by the number of people who are over the age of eighteen in the district as reported by the 2010 U.S. Census. Importantly, the congressional district boundaries reported in the 2010 Census are the same boundaries as used for the 2002 through 2010 congressional elections (the five elections included in our analysis). We then take the resulting calculation and normalize the data by election year such that the values indicate how high voter turnout was in the district relative to all other districts in that election year. Notably, this procedure accounts for the fact that voter turnout is, in an absolute sense, lower in midterm election years as compared with presidential election years.

To evaluate whether the linkage between district opinion and MC voting behavior is heightened as voter turnout increases, we create an interaction term that multiplies district opinion (as measured by district presidential vote share) and district voter turnout together. We then model MC voting behavior for 2003-2013 as a function of this interaction term and the main effects. In all models, we cluster the standard errors by congressional district to account for the

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4 Data on the total number of votes in each congressional district are available at: [http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/electionresults.shtml](http://www.fec.gov/pubrec/electionresults.shtml). Data on the voting age population of each congressional district (as measured by the 2010 U.S. Census) are available at: [http://factfinder.census.gov](http://factfinder.census.gov). Notably, we uncover substantively identical results to those we report below when we instead use the total number of citizens in a district who are over the age of 18 (using data from the 2010 American Community Survey) as the denominator when computing the district voter turnout rate. These additional estimations are reported in Table A-1 of the Appendix.
fact that the data from the same district across multiple years are not statistically independent from one another.

**Analysis**

The first column of Table 1 reports the results from our main analysis that regresses MC voting behavior on the district opinion x voter turnout interaction along with the main effects. The coefficient for the interaction term is positive and statistically different from zero, indicating that district voter turnout positively conditions the relationship between district opinion and MC voting behavior. Put differently, the responsiveness of MCs to district opinion is heightened as district voter turnout increases. The second column in Table 1 uses the same model specification, but adds in an indicator for MC Republican partisanship. The coefficient for the interaction term is again positive and statistically significant and indicates that district turnout positively conditions MC voting behavior even after accounting for the strong predictive power of MC partisanship on roll call voting behavior. Simply stated, congressional districts where constituents turn out to vote at higher rates are rewarded with more responsive MCs.

[Table 1 about here]

From a substantive standpoint, the conditioning effect of district voter turnout on the relationship between district opinion and MC voting behavior is noteworthy. As an illustration, Figure 1 displays the magnitude of the relationship between district opinion and MC behavior across the range of values for (normalized) district voter turnout using the coefficients from the regression reported in the second column of Table 1. As the figure indicates, the statistical relationship is bounded above zero for all values of turnout, but the magnitude becomes larger and larger as the proportion of the district that turns out to vote increases. Indeed, when we
compare the effect of district opinion on MC voting behavior for a district at the 10th and 90th percentile of voter turnout in our sample, we find that the effect is about 40% larger in size in the higher turnout district. In sum, the conditioning effect of district voter turnout on the relationship between district opinion and MC voting behavior is both statistically significant and substantively important in the sense that MCs that represent districts with high levels of voter turnout are markedly more responsive to constituency opinion.

In addition to our main research question, we are also interested if there are partisan differences in the way district voter turnout conditions the responsiveness of MCs to district opinion. Is responsiveness heightened among both Democrats and Republicans in high turnout districts, or is our main result driven by MCs in a single political party? To evaluate this question, we simply split the sample into only Democrats and only Republicans and use the same regression specification reported above. The results of these two estimations are reported in the third and fourth columns of Table 1. Focusing on the coefficient for the interaction term in each model, we uncover an interesting result. Namely, district voter turnout positively conditions MC responsiveness to district opinion among Democratic MCs but not among Republican MCs.

What might explain this rather unexpected finding of partisan differences? We posit two possible explanations. First, it is possible that citizens in districts represented by Democratic

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5 Specifically, using CLARIFY and the model specification from column two of Table 1, we estimated the marginal effect of moving from a district one standard deviation below the mean for Republican presidential vote share to a district one standard deviation above. When district voter turnout was set to the 10th percentile, the marginal effect was .17. When district voter turnout was set to the 90th percentile, the marginal effect was .24.
MCs are more politically active in ways beyond simply voting (e.g., contacting their MC, attending rallies, signing petitions, etc.). These higher rates of political participation can serve to increase the number of ways in which MCs are made aware of citizens’ political opinions in their district. Second, it is possible that Republican MCs are less fearful of facing electoral sanction for shirking district preferences and, as a result, district voter turnout has no conditioning effect on MC responsiveness to public opinion. We expect that this dynamic would be especially prevalent in electorally uncompetitive districts that are routinely won by candidates from the same political party. Indeed, explicating the precise mechanism(s) driving the different results for Democratic and Republican MCs is, we contend, a fruitful avenue for future research.

Examining Possible Alternative Explanations

One potential concern with our interpretation of the analysis presented above is that some other factor(s) could be correlated with both higher voter turnout and better dyadic representation across congressional districts. We identify three possible suspects that could be masking a spurious relationship between turnout and representation: (1) electoral competition, (2) district median income, and (3) district racial composition. Specifically, we expect voter turnout will be higher in districts that are more electorally competitive and have higher median incomes and lower in districts with a greater percentage of non-white residents (Schlozman, Verba, and Brady 2012). To probe the robustness of our empirical results and make sure that the relationship between voter turnout and better representation is not spurious, we run a series of models that account for the three suspects listed above.

To measure whether an election in a given district and year was competitive or not, we create a dummy variable that is coded as one for districts where the winning candidate earned
less than 55% of the total votes cast and zero otherwise. To measure district median income and the percentage of non-white residents, we use data from the American Community Survey. Similar to our empirical strategy above, we interact each of these variables with district opinion to evaluate whether it conditions the relationship between district opinion and MC roll call voting behavior. We then run three separate models (one for each alternative explanation) because of colinearity concerns if we were to include four interaction terms with the same component variable in a single regression. For each model, our goal is to evaluate whether the interaction for district opinion x voter turnout remains positive and statistically different from zero when accounting for these possible alternative explanations.

[Table 2 about here]

The results of these three additional estimations are reported in Table 2. Looking across the three columns, we first note that, as expected, districts with a higher median income display a stronger relationship between district opinion and MC roll call voting. More importantly, however, for all three models the coefficient for the district opinion x voter turnout interaction term remains positive and statistically different from zero. Simply stated, even after accounting for the possible effects of electoral competition and district income and racial demographics, we still find that districts with higher aggregate voter turnout tend to be better represented by their representative in Congress.

Conclusion

In this short paper, we find evidence that the statistical relationship between district opinion and MC roll call behavior is heightened in congressional districts with higher rates of aggregate voter turnout. Building on previous studies that find the opinions of voters are better
represented than the opinions of non-voters within the same electoral jurisdiction, we find that
the “rewards of voting” extend to aggregate turnout as well in terms of how well or poorly an
entire district is represented by their MC relative to other districts. In addition, we uncover
evidence that there are partisan differences in the conditioning effect of district voter turnout
such that higher turnout enhances roll call voting responsiveness among Democratic MCs but not
among Republican MCs. Together, these findings suggest that congressional districts as a whole
can benefit (from a political responsiveness standpoint) when more of their constituents turn out
to vote on Election Day.

Future research should extend this current study and evaluate whether voter turnout can
heighten the responsiveness of elected officials to public opinion in less visible elections that
tend to have lower levels of turnout to begin with. For example, with the recently developed
ability to accurately measure public opinion at the state legislative district level and even at the
municipality level, future work should assess if higher levels of voter turnout can also boost the
political responsiveness of state and local officeholders. Moreover, future studies should evaluate
if the conditioning effect of voter turnout that we uncover in this paper extends to other forms of
political participation. For example, it is plausible that more time-intensive forms of political
participation such as contacting one’s elected officials or getting involved in a political campaign
can enhance political responsiveness even more than voter turnout can. Finally, as we note
above, future research should seek to confirm and better understand why there are partisan
differences in the conditioning effect of voter turnout on political responsiveness.
References


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<th>Sample:</th>
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<th>All MCs</th>
<th>Only Republicans</th>
<th>Only Democrats</th>
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<td>0.013*</td>
<td>-0.027</td>
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<td>0.107*</td>
<td>0.093*</td>
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<td>0.001</td>
<td>0.030*</td>
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<td>R²</td>
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<td>.93</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.50</td>
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<td>2,201</td>
<td>1,092</td>
<td>1,107</td>
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Unit of analysis is an individual Member of Congress (MC) in a single congressional session for 2003-2013. Dependent variable is an MC’s DW-NOMINATE score, with a more conservative voting record coded higher. Cell entries are ordinary least squares regression coefficients with standard errors clustered by congressional district reported beneath in brackets. * denotes p<.05 using a two-tailed test.
Table 2: Evaluating Possible Alternative Explanations

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<td>All MCs</td>
<td>All MCs</td>
<td>All MCs</td>
</tr>
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<td>0.011*</td>
<td>0.013*</td>
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<td>District Conservatism x Competitive Election</td>
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<td>District Conservatism x District Median Income</td>
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<tr>
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<td>.93</td>
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Figure 1: Visualizing the Conditioning Effect of District Voter Turnout

Dashed lines give 95% confidence interval.
Appendix Table A-1: Estimations Using District’s 18+ Citizen Population as the Denominator to Calculate Voter Turnout

<table>
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<td>All MCs</td>
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<td>Only Democrats</td>
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<td>0.061*</td>
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